



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Number 68, March 1996

U.S. Strategic Objectives in East Asia

by Hans Binnendijk*

Workshop Summary

- The central objectives of U.S. strategy for the East Asia-Pacific region are to foster political stability, maintain access to regional markets, ensure freedom of navigation, and prevent the rise of any hostile hegemon. The United States seeks to ensure that no Asian nation's economic strength is translated into military power hostile to the United States. Forward deployed U.S. forces are a principal means of securing such an outcome.
- If the United States is to maintain a force presence once the North Korean threat is gone, it is essential to begin now to construct a new intellectual framework, build solid public support, and recast the U.S. long-term commitment in terms of power projection capability.
- The United States needs to harmonize its economic and security interests, with the clear understanding that emphasizing short term economic concerns over longer term security concerns risks achieving neither sustained economic growth nor enhanced security.
- China's growing economic power will eventually produce commensurate military power. This is potentially troublesome because Chinese leaders currently view the United States as an obstacle to national reunification and to China's playing a defining role in regional affairs. While China will probably not use military means to force reunification unless Taiwan moves to establish independence, tension in the Taiwan Strait will likely persist for years.
- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is unlikely to survive long term, but a sudden collapse would risk conflict, pose staggering economic and political problems for the Republic of Korea (ROK), and alter the regional strategic equation. It is essential to strive for as soft a landing as possible.
- The United States and Japan need to review the basis for cooperation on Taiwan and Korea contingencies. The most important immediate task is to coordinate policies in advance, and then to create a mechanism to coordinate contingency planning.

Fundamental Strategic Objectives

The central objectives of U.S. security strategy in the East Asia-Pacific region include fostering political stability, maintaining access to regional markets, ensuring freedom of navigation, and preventing the rise of any hostile hegemon. More specifically, the U.S. central objective should be to ensure that no Asian nation's economic strength is translated into military power hostile to the United States. Current tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean peninsula could be a starting point for peer competitor rivalries. Over time, such rivalries might expand to include conflict over resources, markets, jobs, and environmental issues.

U.S. Approach to East Asia Policy

While U.S. economic and security interests in the region are increasing, U.S. leverage is decreasing. Nevertheless, the United States will continue to possess major strengths: global military capability, the value of access to the U.S. market, the carrots of investment and technology transfer, and the desire of virtually all regional powers for a continued U.S. military presence. Our military presence/capability in the region is the most influential of these points of advantage.

The United States can, however, more fully exploit these strengths by carefully reexamining present priorities. In relations with Japan, for example, it is necessary to determine whether economic or security concerns should be emphasized. Similarly, U.S. relations with China would be better served if it were possible to rank order our expectations for China's policies on Taiwan, non-proliferation, human rights and trade.

Asian countries, China in particular, want to be taken seriously and treated with respect. In a region made up of increasingly confident, prosperous, outward-looking countries, the United States faces a more difficult leadership challenge now that the Cold War is over. Some problems may well defy resolution, and it may be necessary to accommodate a higher level of stress with some Asian powers. The U.S. regional position might be improved if Washington were to lower its expectations on what can be accomplished, especially on moral or ideological issues.

The U.S. Overseas Military Presence

Both U.S. and regional interests would be served by a U.S. military presence in the East Asia-Pacific region once North Korea is no longer a threat. The United States needs to consider making several adjustments, however, if we are to sustain such a long term military presence.

First, if U.S. bilateral ties with the ROK and Japan are to continue to flourish, we need to continue building a new intellectual framework and a solid base of public support in all three countries. U.S. action alone is not sufficient. The Japanese and Korean governments must educate their citizens on the value of security ties with the United States, and marshal public support. Failure to begin now in Korea and continue with Japan increases the likelihood that post-unification Korean nationalism will make it impossible to sustain even a reduced U.S. troop presence on the peninsula. The current pressure to reduce the U.S. presence in Japan would surely increase if Japan were the only Asian nation hosting large U.S. forces.

Second, strategic flexibility might be enhanced eventually by transitioning away from the 100,000 troop level and recasting U.S. regional commitment in terms of power projection capability. U.S. considerations might center on the composition and justification of U.S. forces in the East Asia-Pacific

region following resolution of the Korea issue. For the near to mid-term, however, Secretary Perry's declaration that we would maintain 100,000 troops in the region, with 47,000 in Japan, will remain a political bellwether of the U.S. commitment.

Finally, a key objective for the United States must be to gain explicit Chinese acknowledgement that the United States has legitimate reasons for keeping military forces forward deployed in the region, and that China will not attempt to undermine that presence. For its part, the United States must avoid being perceived by the region as provoking Chinese bellicosity by overestimating China's capabilities, by defining China as an adversary, or by assuming China's hostile intent.

Thinking About Economics and Security

Domestic economic concerns in the United States and many Asian countries have increased the salience of economic arguments in foreign policy and national security debates. A single-minded focus on near-term economic concerns, however, will erode the overall environment in which longer-term U.S. security aims must be achieved. It is necessary, therefore, to concentrate on harmonizing United States economic and security interests. While it is difficult to argue convincingly that a forward security presence in the East Asia-Pacific region guarantees U.S. economic interests, the absence of a forward presence would reduce overall American economic, political, and military clout, including opportunities for high level lobbying for strategic investment and commerce. In addition, maintaining our forward defense presence serves to reinforce the fundamental position that the United States will not accept hegemonic exclusion from areas of trade or strategic salience.

Despite the avowed primacy of economic issues, the United States arguably undervalues its economic interests. For example, the United States could optimize the use of tied aid (bilateral and multilateral) for the fostering of U.S. commercial advantage, and could more carefully determine which regional areas are of highest importance to the United States in order to orchestrate strategic investments.

The argument that economics is of primary importance also fails to convince because neither Japan nor Singapore, while both possessing extremely strong economies, feels particularly secure. Both are clearly willing to state that their security requires a forward U.S. military presence. The true measure must be that economic growth enhances security but is, by itself, no guarantee of safety.

There is a clear implication that managing the new security environment will require a greater degree of sharing of responsibilities. New forms of cooperation with regional powers will become more common. In the new security environment, the increasing capability of the regional powers is mostly help, not hindrance.

China

The rise of China presents a challenge for which there is no instructive historical guide. There are three major considerations:

First, **the doubling of China's GDP every ten years represents unprecedented economic growth** and will provide Beijing with the means to develop commensurate military power, auguring rapid change in the security environment. Second, from Beijing's perspective, **Chinese policies on Taiwan and the South China Sea** are matters of national reunification, not ideology. Chinese leaders understand and appreciate the stability engendered by the presence of U.S. forces. However, they also tend to view the U.S. military presence and the alliances with Japan and Korea as obstacles to achieving the reunification

of Chinese territory. Similarly, the alliances are seen as potential obstacles to the expanded regional role so desired by Beijing. Third, for historical reasons, **China is concerned with upholding its national sovereignty**. U.S. positions on human rights, intellectual property, and arms sales are often viewed as challenges to that sovereignty. As a result, Chinese leaders are inherently suspicious of U.S. strategic intentions and motivations.

While Beijing is unlikely to compromise on its claims of sovereignty over Taiwan, it is doubtful that China will use military means to force reunification unless the Chinese leadership is convinced Taiwan is moving inexorably toward independence. If that were the case, China might well prove willing to pay the price for attacking Taiwan, with limited prospect that the United States could deter such an attack. The challenge for the United States, China and Taiwan, is to prevent things from getting to this point.

The U.S. policy of deliberate ambiguity is designed to deter Beijing while discouraging Taipei from pushing for independence. Ambiguity carries an inherent risk, however, that people on both sides may misinterpret the U.S. position. Recently, senior U.S. officials have reaffirmed the U.S. "one China" policy. But there is also a need for private diplomacy that goes beyond what U.S. officials can say publicly. The United States must continually reiterate to Beijing that there would be grave consequences if China were to attack Taiwan. The United States also needs to make it clear to Taipei that moves towards independence are dangerous and that U.S. military assistance is by no means assured if Taiwan declares independence.

Evolution towards democracy in China--if it occurs--will not reduce the widespread desire of mainland Chinese to complete the reunification of China. Economic development and the rise of democracy might, however, help to offset the fears of the Taiwanese people regarding Beijing and reduce resistance to at least discussing some form of integration across the Strait. In any case, the Taiwan issue will likely vex U.S. relations with China for many years into the future.

The Korean Peninsula

The crucial questions concerning Korean unification are "when and how," not "if." However, even under the best of circumstances, integrating the DPRK into a peninsula-wide Republic of Korea will be daunting, and a sudden collapse would be particularly dangerous:

- It could lead to conflict, either between rival factions within the North, or by inducing the DPRK military to lash out against the South--and the U.S.--in an all-or-nothing gamble;
- It would present the South with staggering problems in absorbing the North economically and politically;
- It would alter the strategic equation in Northeast Asia, undercutting the rationale for the U.S. military presence on the peninsula and raising questions regarding a united Korea's relationship with Japan.

Given the possible implications of a DPRK hard landing, it is in the interest of the United States as well as the region to engineer as soft a landing as possible for the reunification of Korea. The United States, Japan and China could do much to facilitate a soft landing. U.S. leadership is indispensable, and we should consult closely with the ROK government without allowing Seoul to dictate the precise terms or the pace of U.S.-DPRK relations.

Japan

The United States and Japan need to develop a basis for cooperation on Taiwan and Korea contingencies. Japan today is poorly prepared politically to respond to a crisis in either area. The Japanese government has yet to decide what manner and levels of support could be provided, and it is a long way from putting into place the required coordination mechanisms. Ideally, Japan would provide similar kinds of support to the U.S. in the East Asia-Pacific region that the European allies provided during the Gulf War. But, even though Japanese politics is evolving in a favorable direction, and even though Tokyo is feeling increasingly uneasy about China, such support is unlikely in the near-term unless we address the issue directly. It is clear that a post-Cold War scenario where Japan provides money while the U.S. spills blood in Asia is unacceptable and potentially destructive of the alliance. This, in turn, would have obvious negative consequences for the U.S. security position in the East Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, it is important to carefully calibrate demands on Japan. Tokyo's self-constrained security policies are an important factor in regional stability.

In the face of potential conflict on Taiwan and Korea, the most important immediate task is that the U.S. and Japan coordinate policies in advance. Once the two governments are in agreement on the diplomacy, they need to create a mechanism to coordinate contingency planning at all levels of government. Lower level staff talks, in isolation, are inadequate for issues of such importance to the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

Recommendations

- DoD should begin laying the groundwork for a future U.S. troop presence in the East Asia-Pacific region that is based on power projection capabilities and the revolution in military affairs. Future presence must take into account political expectations in the region, and benefits to U.S. strategic influence.
- The United States should attempt to intensify the security dialogue with the PRC, the central focus of which should be each side's long range strategic interests.
- The United States and Japan should begin substantive discussions on how to coordinate responses to possible Taiwan and Korea contingencies.
- The United States needs to engage both the ROK and Japanese governments in a campaign to build a new understanding for the continued presence of U.S. forces in Northeast Asia once North Korea ceases to be a threat.
- The United States needs to create a more effective interagency mechanism to coordinate economic and security policy for the East Asia-Pacific region.

About the Workshop

U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) and the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) co-sponsored a workshop assessing U.S. policy in the East Asia-Pacific region in February 1996. Thirty-five experts participated, including many current and former senior officials in the foreign policy, national security and intelligence communities. This paper reviews significant issues raised at the workshop.

* Written with the assistance of Dr. Lee Endress, Dr. Ronald Montaperto, and Colonel Bill Drennan. For

more information contact: Dr. Binnendijk, Dr. Montaperto, or Colonel Drennan at INSS (202-685-3837); or Dr. Endress, J-53, PACOM (808-477-0885). Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of PACOM, INSS, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or any other government agency.

NOTE

[Return to Top](#) | [Return to Strategic Forum Index](#) | [Return to Research and Publications](#)

The Strategic Forum provides summaries of work by members and guests of the Institute for National Strategic Studies and the National Defense University faculty. These include reports of original research, synopses of seminars and conferences, the results of unclassified war games, and digests of remarks by distinguished speakers.

Editor - Jonathan W. Pierce

INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

A . Report Title: U.S. Strategic Objectives in East Asia

B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet: 09/28/01

**C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office
Symbol, & Ph #):** National Defense University Press
Institute for National Strategic Studies
Washington, DC 20001

D. Currently Applicable Classification Level: Unclassified

E. Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release

F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:
DTIC-OCA, Initials: __VM__ **Preparation Date** 09/28/01

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.